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## From 'the great Handel chorus' to 'wild passion and fancy': Listening to Handel and Purcell in *The Mill on the Floss*

Delia da Sousa Correa

When George Eliot was born, it was sixty years since Handel's death and 124 years since the death of Purcell. Both were composers of the increasingly distant past; however, while Purcell's work was selectively known, Handel was celebrated as the most important national composer in Britain, especially following the burgeoning of choral societies and singing-class movements from the early 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Handel, not surprisingly, is the composer more extensively referred to in Eliot's work, but both these composers feature importantly in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). This article considers how references to Purcell relate to the more prevalent allusions to Handel in Eliot's writing. The two brief quotations in my title seem to sum up prevailing attitudes to both composers: on the one hand there is Eliot's lifelong celebration of 'the great Handel chorus' and on the other the 'wild passion and fancy' of the music by Purcell that is implicated in Maggie Tulliver's undoing in *The Mill on the Floss*.<sup>2</sup> A clear contrast — and yet Eliot's allusions to Handel are more varied than one might suppose. Contemplation of the combined allusions to Handel and to Purcell in the novel allows a more nuanced and interesting version of Handel to become apparent in Eliot's work than that suggested by dominant views of his stature at the time and by her own expressed veneration for the communal value of his choral works. A predecessor of this different Handel in evidence in *The Mill on the Floss* also arises in Eliot's 1857 novella 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story',

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<sup>1</sup> A number of works trace the history of this movement, which manifested itself in choral societies and festivals and in the different branches of the sol-fa and singing-class movements. See, for example, Michael Musgrave, *The Musical Life of the Crystal Palace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); see also, Charles Edward McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-Fa Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Herbert A. Simon, *Songs and Words: A History of the Curwen Press* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973); and Phyllis Weliver, 'On Tonic Sol-fa, January 1842', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, August 2013 <[http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps\\_articles=phyllis-weliver-on-tonic-sol-fa-january-1842](http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=phyllis-weliver-on-tonic-sol-fa-january-1842)> [accessed 21 December 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John Sibree, Jr, [11 February 1848], in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), 1: 1836–1851 (1954), 247; George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 338 (Book 6, Chap. 3).

where the heroine turns to Handel's oratorio repertoire to express her emotional turmoil, in addition to singing 'Che farò' from Gluck's 1762 opera *Orfeo*. Allusions to these composers impinge on Eliot's engagement with ancient tragedy and myth and contribute importantly to the structuring of her novel; they raise questions about how Eliot could expect her contemporary readership to respond to them. I would propose that they are not only important for this historical understanding but continue to play a potentially significant role for readers now. The article thus asks how these allusions might continue to contribute to the experience of reading her work today: what can we gain from listening to these composers of the past whose music is invoked in this literature of our past?

This study of Eliot's reception of Handel and Purcell is partly driven by an ambition to move closer to an understanding of the musical world of the novel and of Eliot's original readership. Musical references in novels are literary tropes that arguably say more about writing than about music. Thus, while the musical repertoire alluded to in Victorian fiction is always significant (and it is certainly significant when repertoire is specified and when not), too much speculative investigation of musical experience can justifiably seem suspect. Nevertheless, puzzling over the specifics of musical repertoire, and about how musical experience impacts on reading, can influence how we understand the significance of musical allusion for writing. It can also inform our understanding of the surviving connections and significant gaps between the readership of Victorian novels now and their original readership.

If the historical nature of Eliot's allusions to Handel and Purcell makes them of interest in relation to how connections between old music and ancient tragedy are generated in *The Mill on the Floss*, it also makes them of additional consequence to the question of how literature's engagements with this music might forge bridges from the past to the future: from the time of writing to that of our current reading. For the purposes of this article, a focus on these two composers from among the extraordinary wealth of musical allusion that permeates Eliot's prose allows the tracing of particular interconnected threads within its intricate fabric.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a similar focus on allusions to Schubert in *Daniel Deronda*, see my chapter on 'George Eliot, Schubert and the Cosmopolitan Music of *Daniel Deronda*', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music*, ed. by Delia da Sousa Correa (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming). For more extended accounts of the role of music in *The Mill on the Floss*, see Delia da Sousa Correa, *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 102–29; see also, Beryl Gray, *George Eliot and Music* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 14–78; and Phyllis Weliver, *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860–1900: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 184–205. For a summary of music in George Eliot's work and a more general account of music in Victorian fiction, see Delia da Sousa Correa,

**‘Handel’s music always brings me a revival’**

In 1859, the year in which she was writing *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot wrote of Handel to her friend Sara Hennell, exclaiming that ‘there are few things that I care for more in the way of music than his choruses performed by a grand orchestra’.<sup>4</sup> Eliot’s admiration for Handel finds expression elsewhere in her letters, in allusions to the Handel Festival at Sydenham and to other Handel concerts,<sup>5</sup> including numerous performances of *Messiah* which Eliot first reported hearing in Birmingham in 1840, together with ‘some beautiful selections from other oratorios of Handel and Haydn’.<sup>6</sup>

Pleasurable opportunities to hear Handel continue to feature throughout Eliot’s correspondence.<sup>7</sup> Her celebration of the power of Handel’s oratorios seems typical of attitudes towards his music at the time. In a letter of 1871 a pronouncement of ‘the sublime effect of the Handel choruses, and the total futility of the solos’ echoes the way in which many Victorian social reformers praised the capacity of concerted music to create a sense of community and its role as an instrument of social improvement.<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that Eliot’s experience of hearing the solos in oratorios performed in vast spaces was at times literally ‘futile’ in that they may have been all but inaudible in comparison with the massed forces of the choir

‘Music’, in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 206–13, and ‘Music’, in *The Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Linda K. Hughes, 4 vols (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), III, 1092–1101. For a variety of recent case studies of nineteenth-century music and fiction, see essays by Gillen D’Arcy-Wood, John Hughes, Michael Klein, and Cormac Newark in the forthcoming *Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music*.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 21 May [1859], in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III: 1851–1861 (1954), 70–71. The quotation in the section heading is from a letter to Mrs Peter Alfred Taylor, 3 March 1864, in *Eliot Letters*, IV: 1862–1868 (1955), 134, in anticipation of hearing *Judas Maccabaeus*. In 1846 a much younger Eliot had noted that she would not be able to attend a centenary performance of *Judas Maccabaeus* at Exeter Hall on 5 June that year (see letter to Mr and Mrs Charles Bray, 1 June 1846, in *Eliot Letters*, I, 219). A letter of 1865 sees her looking forward to a performance of *Israel in Egypt*, to be sung at the Exeter Hall on 8 December (to Sara Sophia Hennell, 7 December 1865, in *Eliot Letters*, IV, 210).

<sup>5</sup> Eliot’s letters record her looking forward to the Sydenham Festival in 1859, when she heard *Messiah* on 20 June; and in 1874, when she inquired about the festival after Hennell had attended (letter to Charles Bray, 18 June 1859; letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 24 June 1859, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III, 87, 90, n. 4; and letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 20 November 1874, in *Eliot Letters*, VI: 1874–1877 (1956), 94).

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Maria Lewis, 1 October 1840, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, I, 68.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, letter to Mrs Richard Congreve, 7 December 1860, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III, 363; and George Henry Lewes’s journal, 7 December 1860, in *Eliot Letters*, III, 363, n. 364.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Mrs Peter Alfred Taylor, 2 August 1871, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, V: 1869–1873 (1955), 173.

— especially at Sydenham, where, from 1857 onwards, the Triennial Handel Festival was held in the central transept of the Crystal Palace. In any event, Handel's music was certainly revered more than any other for its social value, this reputation enhanced in the nineteenth century by the choral society performances of his oratorios that gave vast numbers of people the chance to take part. As Michael Musgrave puts it, 'if it can fairly be said that the network of choral societies was the unifying feature of English musical life of the first half of the nineteenth century, it was the music of Handel which embodied its spirit' (p. 27).

Eliot does not always record her responses to Handel's music in detail, but her correspondence indicates the extent to which allusions to the composer could carry an agreed significance among her acquaintance and the consistent part that his music played in their lives. Such brief exchanges about music are vestiges of lost conversations that we would dearly love to overhear. Often, they also show how pervasively music could be assumed to have a shared meaning, notwithstanding the complexities inherent to the notion of musical expression then, as now. In June 1859, a month after Eliot had written to Sara Hennell of her love for Handel's choruses, Hennell sent her an account of a performance of *Saul* at the Sydenham festival. For Hennell, the chorus 'Envy, eldest born of Hell', which begins the second act, had summed up a recent conversation with Eliot about, among other things, the philosopher Herbert Spencer. Exactly what the issue with Spencer was is not specified, although Eliot had just revealed that she was the author of the wildly successful *Adam Bede*.

Spencer himself was the chief proponent of the widely accepted idea that music provided a language of emotion of crucial importance to social evolution.<sup>9</sup> Sara Hennell certainly felt confident that Handel's music was a form of communication whose relevance to their talk needed no particular justification:

The piece that has made the deepest impression of all was that singularly appropriate one that came on Wednesday after all those painful details you had been giving me about H[erbert] S[pencer] the day before [...] the Chorus out of Saul, Envy, elder-born [*sic*] of hell. I don't think I ever heard it before, and the effect was impressive beyond description.

<sup>9</sup> See Herbert Spencer, 'The Origin and Function of Music', in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858–74), 1 (1858), 359–84 (p. 369) (first publ. in *Fraser's Magazine*, October 1857, pp. 396–408). A detailed account of Spencer's theories of music in relation to Eliot is provided in my *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, especially pp. 11–44; the introduction and first chapter of this work also discuss wider nineteenth-century debates about musical expression and music's origins.



Hennell does, nevertheless, attempt to describe the effect, confident of a common understanding of the solipsistic drama, ‘of a rolling, monotonous, continually-depressing, grumbling-downwards in the bass — always falling back upon its own disappointed tonic’.<sup>10</sup> At this point she includes two measures of the bass line in the letter as a musical illustration (Fig. 1). ‘This goes on so uniformly in accompaniment throughout the piece’, Hennell continues, ‘while the voices are moralizing, till it finishes in a few solemn chords of crushing deliciousness — just the sensation when good is being rung out of your heart-pangs —.’ ‘Poor, dear, great Herbert Spencer’, Hennell concludes, ‘and Thackeray — and how many more! And after this came the inexpressible sighs of the Dead March. I wish it had occurred to me at the time to consider this as the echoes from the battlefield of moral conflict!’ (III, 97). ‘Why did not you hear this!’, she exclaims at the close of her letter, clearly feeling that Handel’s music would have conveyed so much more than her verbal gloss could do. Indeed, Hennell’s figuring of an enviously disgruntled Herbert Spencer in the ‘continually-depressing,

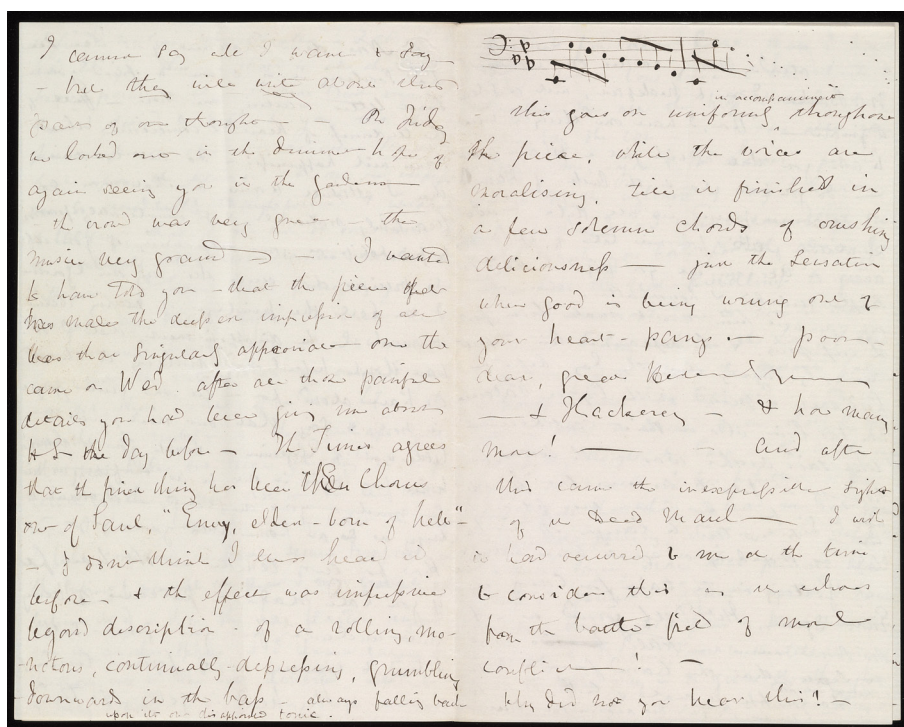


Fig. 1: Manuscript letter from Sara Sophia Hennell, 26 June 1859, Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. © Jonathan Garnault Ouvry.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to George Eliot, 26 June 1859, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III, 97.

grumbling-downwards' of Handel's chorus can readily be appreciated when hearing the repeated [descending scale passages in its base line](#).<sup>11</sup>

Eliot's own sense of Handel as representing an ethical and intellectual ideal was as long-standing as her delight in his music. Her invocation of 'the great Handel chorus' comes from a letter of 1848, written at the end of her twenties. It is clear that Handel's choral works operate as an emblem of virtue, which she can assume her correspondent John Sibree will recognize: 'when the tones of our voice have betrayed peevishness or harshness, we seem doubly haunted by the ghost of our sins', she writes; '— we are doubly conscious that we have been untrue to our part in the great Handel chorus.' This thought leads to further reflections on music's importance as Eliot endorses Hegel's view of the inherent superiority of music over the visual arts: 'music arches over this existence with another and a diviner' (*Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, I, 247).

The decidedly heavenly attributes of 'the great Handel chorus' were qualities widely invoked in poetic responses to his music. From his own time onwards, tributes to Handel in verse laid the ground for his celebration in the nineteenth century as a national treasure and a moral and spiritual inspiration.<sup>12</sup> Eliot's view of Handel's human and spiritual profundity is also apparent in a letter of 1862, following a performance of *Messiah*. She had long since lost her religious faith but is prompted to echo the 'Hallelujah Chorus' to underpin her thoughts on the value of the Christian tradition: 'what pitiable people those are who feel no poetry in Christianity! Surely the acme of poetry hitherto is the conception of the suffering Messiah — and the final triumph "He shall reign for ever and for ever [*sic*]"'.<sup>13</sup> Like many of the poets who celebrated Handel, Eliot takes up the diction and structure of Handel choruses. These draw heavily on biblical texts, of course, but are all the more memorable, thanks to music's mnemonic power, in the form of Charles Jennens's libretto for *Messiah*.

<sup>11</sup> Handel, 'Envy, eldest born of Hell' from *Saul*, The Sixteen, dir. by Harry Christophers (Coro, 2012). Hyperlinks are given to recordings available on Spotify as an easily accessible source that does not require readers to have individual or institutional subscriptions to any particular electronic music libraries.

<sup>12</sup> A fascinating account of the profuse response to Handel in verse from his own time forwards was provided by Jean L. Kreiling, in a paper titled 'The Reception History of Handel's *Messiah*: Poetic Perspectives', given on 21 November 2009 at a conference, 'Purcell, Handel and Literature', at Senate House, London. Examples discussed included William Lisle Bowles's 'On Hearing "The Messiah" Performed in Gloucester Cathedral, Sept. 18 1835' and Frances Ridley Havergal's *Threefold Praise and Other Pieces* (1888).

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 26 December 1862, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, IV, 71.

The sentiments of Eliot's 1848 letter to John Sibree also find later expression in Eliot's 1867 humanist poem 'O may I join the choir invisible':

O may I join the choir invisible  
Of those immortal dead who live again  
In minds made better by their presence  
[...]

So to live is heaven:  
To make undying music in the world,  
Breathing as beauteous order that controls  
With growing sway the growing life of man.<sup>14</sup>

Bearing in mind her invocation of 'the great Handel chorus', we can infer that the choir invisible might well be singing one of these.

It is hardly surprising that Eliot went on, in *Middlemarch* (1871–72), to give her countryman Caleb Garth a veneration for Handel that underpins his portrayal as a custodian of community values. For Garth, there is 'sublime music' in the sounds of 'the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labour by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed'; in a strongly performative passage, this is a 'sublime music' wrought by 'the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and plash of the engine'.<sup>15</sup> Eliot writes that 'Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation' at the value of this great music (p. 246), which finds its equivalent in the 'mighty structure of tones' in Handel's oratorios:

Caleb Garth was very fond of music, and when he could afford it went to hear an oratorio that came within his reach, returning from it with a profound reverence for this mighty structure of tones, which made him sit meditatively, looking at the floor and throwing much unutterable language into his outstretched hands. (p. 539 (Chap. 56))

That the oratorios Garth hears are Handel's can be inferred from another passage in the novel when Caleb describes how the beautiful speaking voice of Dorothea Brooke arouses memories of *Messiah*. 'You would like to hear her speak', he explains:

She speaks in such plain words, and a voice like music. Bless me! It reminds one of bits in the 'Messiah' — 'and straightway

<sup>14</sup> 'O may I join the choir invisible', in *George Eliot: Collected Poems*, ed. by Lucien Jenkins (London: Skoob Seriph, 1989), pp. 49–50.

<sup>15</sup> *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 246 (Chap. 24).



there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host, praising  
God and saying; 'it has a tone with it that satisfies your ear.  
(pp. 538–39)

It is important, of course, that what Dorothea is speaking to him about is his management of philanthropic housing schemes on her land, the very kind of 'business' that holds a musical power for Garth and which might fittingly win praises from the 'heavenly host'.

The elevated moral status enjoyed by Handel's music is also apparent in the work of other prose writers of Eliot's time. Samuel Butler, famously, was obsessed with Handel, asserting that 'of all dead men Handel has had the largest place in my thoughts'.<sup>16</sup> Butler is an extreme case but, from the end of the eighteenth century, veneration for Handel's music is quite frequently reflected in novels. The heroine of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary* (1788) is restored, at a point of crisis, to a reassuring state of meditation by playing Handel; and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) is also saved from despair by hearing an aria from *Messiah*.<sup>17</sup>

Oratorio clearly dominated Eliot and her contemporaries' experience of Handel, but not exclusively. Later in life Eliot mentions the great pleasure she has been gaining from hearing the baritone George Henschel, who 'stirs one's soul by singing fine Handel and other songs'.<sup>18</sup> Henschel, who lived until 1934, made recordings in the 1920s which are a rare auditory trace of Eliot's world. These do not, unfortunately, include any Handel, although they feature her favourite Romantic composers, such as Schubert and Schumann. Henschel himself recalled Eliot's and Lewes's great love of music, evidenced at private musical parties in excited demands for more songs from Lewes, as from Robert Browning, who frequently requested 'Rendi'l sereno al ciglio' from Handel's opera *Sosarme*, thus probably one of the Handel songs that so stirred Eliot herself.<sup>19</sup> (The aria, a consoling recommendation of serenity, is scored for high voice, but nineteenth-century

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Robert Manson Myers, 'Samuel Butler: Handelian', *Musical Quarterly*, 34 (1948), 177–98 (p. 177).

<sup>17</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction; and, The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. by Gary Kelly (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 46, n. 2; *The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Joanne Shattock and others, Pickering Masters, 10 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005–06), v: *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. by Joanne Wilkes (2005), p. 87 (Chap. 9).

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Mrs Edward Burne-Jones, 23 March 1878, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, vii: 1878–1880 (1955), 18. The first record of Eliot having heard Henschel sing is in G. H. Lewes's diary, 16 March 1877, in *Eliot Letters*, vi, 348.

<sup>19</sup> Handel, 'Rendi'l sereno al ciglio' from *Sosarme*, Margaret Ritchie (soprano), The St Cecilia Orchestra, 1955 (Eloquence, 2019). There is also a 1925 recording (with preceding recitative) by contralto Clara Butt. *Sosarme, re di Media* (Sosarmes, King of Media; HWV 30) written for the Royal Academy of Music, was first performed on 15 February 1732 at the King's Theatre.

performance practice was far more flexible in this regard than became the norm in later times.)

Eliot's praise of Henschel's solo recitals is evidence that she enjoyed a variety of performances of Handel's music in addition to his grand choruses. And she certainly did not limit her appreciation to Handel's sacred works. In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Mirah's repertoire includes the haunting 'Lascia ch'io pianga' ('Let me weep [my cruel fate]') from Handel's opera *Rinaldo*, which she sings when she believes that Daniel is in love with Gwendolen.<sup>20</sup> In Eliot's novel, Handel's music continues to reverberate among the wealth of musical allusions to composers more contemporary with the novel's setting, including Wagner.<sup>21</sup>

This musically delicious outpouring of despair indicates another experience of Handel than that provided by his uplifting oratorio choruses, and it is not the only time a very different Handel appears in Eliot's work. Returning to the period of *The Mill on the Floss* we find that in the same letter to Sara Hennell of May 1859 quoted above, in which Eliot expresses her admiration for Handel's oratorio choruses, she also mentions that 'we are going on Wednesday evening to hear *Acis and Galatea*' (*Eliot Letters*, III, 71). This was a performance of Handel's setting of words by John Gay, first performed in 1733 and now given at St James's Hall on 25 May 1859. The editor of Eliot's letters, Gordon Haight, notes that what was performed on this occasion was 'Handel's *Serenata* with accompanying music by Mozart'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Handel, 'Lascia ch'io pianga' from *Rinaldo*, Cecilia Bartoli (soprano), Academy of Ancient Music, dir. by Christopher Hogwood (Decca, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 675, 677 (Chap. 61). For a detailed account of musical allusion in *Daniel Deronda*, see my *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, pp. 130–91. See also, Gray, pp. 100–19; John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 82–99; Ruth A. Solie, *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 153–86; and Weliver, *Woman Musicians*, pp. 226–44. Additional discussion of *Daniel Deronda* and Wagner can be found in Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 123–65.

<sup>22</sup> *Eliot Letters*, III, 71, n. 6. I am grateful to David Wright for alerting me to a copy of an advertisement in *The Times* for 19 May 1859 which confirms the date of this performance. A choir of almost four hundred performers was promised and the concert was to include further works including a Mozart concerto. On the popularity of *Acis and Galatea* during the Victorian period, see Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'Handel's *Acis and Galatea*: A Victorian View', in *Europe, Empire and Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century British Music*, ed. by Rachel Cowgill and Julian Rushton [2006] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 249–64 <[http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/OXVU:LSCOP\\_OX:oxfalepho20963319](http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/OXVU:LSCOP_OX:oxfalepho20963319)> [accessed 11 January 2020] ebook. I am grateful to Leanne Langley for alerting me to this essay as I was completing mine. Marvin notes that Mozart and Mendelssohn's arrangements were more often performed than Handel's own orchestration (p. 250). A summary of the salient features of Mozart's arrangement is supplied by Julian Rushton: 'Mozart's catalogue tells

Eliot thus presumably heard Mozart's 1788 arrangement, K566. Inevitably, it is often quite hard to know exactly what Eliot heard — and, frustratingly, Haight did not specify how he knew that this was the version of *Acis and Galatea* that was performed on this occasion. (There was also an 1828 arrangement by Mendelssohn.<sup>23</sup>) Eliot's response to the 1859 performance of *Acis and Galatea* is not recorded in her letters, although she was looking forward to it as 'a musical treat'.<sup>24</sup> However, *Acis and Galatea* evidently acted as an imaginative stimulus, as this work, rather than oratorio, came to feature in the novel on which she was currently engaged. We can find her response to that 1859 performance, not in her correspondence, but in *The Mill on the Floss*.

### Handel in *The Mill on the Floss* and 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story'

In the *Acis and Galatea* that Eliot probably did hear — Mozart's 1788 orchestral arrangement, sung to John Gay's English text — Mozart had expanded Handel's orchestration and added in the sonority of the clarinets that he loved, doubling Handel's oboe parts and even taking over oboe solos. And if Eliot heard Mozart's full-textured orchestration with the addition of

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us that he completed his arrangement in November 1788, adding a suitably pastoral Larghetto ("Musette") from Handel's Concerto Grosso Op. 6 No. 6 and a short Largo from Op. 6 No. 7, as a suitable preparation for "Wretched Lovers" (curiously translated as "Arme Hirten": "Unfortunate Shepherds") [...]. Mozart considerably expanded the viola, second violin, and bassoon parts to fill out the texture. More radically, he supplied classical-style natural horn parts in several movements, sustained or punctuating the music rhythmically (when Handel uses horns, they are soloists: there are none in his *Acis*). And still more anachronistically, he added parts for his beloved clarinets.' See Julian Rushton, 'Murm'ring still his gentle love', Notes for 2007 Bampton Classical Opera production of *Acis and Galatea: A Masque in Two Acts*, music by Handel [1718], arr. by Mozart (K 566), libretto by John Gay <<https://bamptonopera.org/operadetail.htm?opera=14>> [accessed 22 December 2019].

<sup>23</sup> This is one of the interesting challenges of interdisciplinary work in literature and music. How is one to achieve anything like an adequate sense of the likely form in which writers like Eliot and her contemporaries heard Handel's music? They often knew it via keyboard reductions, of course, one of which I will mention below, but, in the case of such a widely performed composer, more detailed information about what precisely was performed in specific public concerts is likely to be increasingly available thanks to growing research on concert life during this period by musicologists. Information of this kind might help to interpret some of the naturally incomplete accounts left by Eliot of works that she heard: *Messiah* minus organ, for example (letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 26 December 1862, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, iv, 71), or 'Handel's Concerto for Piano', which Lewes recorded their having heard at a Joachim and Agnes Zimmermann concert in 1870 (Lewes's diary, 12 February 1870, in *Eliot Letters*, v, 77, n. 4).

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, 21 May 1859, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, iii, 71.

clarinets, particularly in those parts of Handel's work portraying romantic love, this may be significant.<sup>25</sup> For, in *The Mill on the Floss*, she turns to Handel to suggest a quite different kind of musical response to the communal virtue and spiritual refreshment invoked by Gaskell, Wollstonecraft, and, frequently, by Eliot herself. In this novel, melodies from *Acis and Galatea* form part of a musical enchantment that sweeps the heroine Maggie Tulliver along currents of desire running counter to her conscious duty. Gillian Beer has commented on how the myth of Acis and Galatea, in which the sea nymph Galatea transforms her lost lover Acis into a river spirit, haunts the novel from its opening invocation of the River Floss hurrying into the sea's embrace.<sup>26</sup> In this first paragraph of the novel, the river is 'like a living companion', its 'low placid voice' part of a mesmeric, sound-imbued world. Subsequently, more human — and more realistically constrained — forms of musicality come into play.

One of Maggie's earliest encounters with music comes in the form of her uncle Pullet's miraculous snuffbox which plays 'Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!' from Act 1 of *Acis and Galatea* in a passage Eliot wrote three weeks after going to hear Handel's pastoral opera.<sup>27</sup> The instrumental introduction to this aria, with flutes and tinkling triangles, does have an enchanting music-box quality. The impact of the tiny musical snuffbox signals the social and acoustic limitations on musical experience in the novel's world; Maggie's childhood entrancement by 'the fairy tune' also prefigures later musical seductions in the novel (p. 81 (Book 1, Chap. 9)). And

<sup>25</sup> See Rushton, Notes for 2007 Bampton Classical Opera: 'In *Acis and Galatea* Mozart sometimes doubles clarinets with the oboes that Handel did use; sometimes (as at the opening of the overture) he allows them to usurp the solo work for oboes, fundamentally changing the colour of the music. But he does not substitute mechanically; it is noticeable that he omitted clarinets in both the arias for the monster Polyphemus. [...] Clarinets, then, are instruments of love, an application found in Mozart's later operas [...]. In *Acis* Mozart is at his most imaginative, and skilful, in the solo for Galatea after the death of her lover: "Must I my Acis still bemoan?" Handel composed the introduction as an oboe solo with cello and keyboard continuo. Mozart transformed this into a quartet for two clarinets and two bassoons, realising the harmony and counterpoint implied by Handel's bass; the second clarinet and first bassoon are accordingly Mozart's own, and very beautiful, composition. The effect is (for 1788) entirely modern, but no less moving.' A recording of Mozart's orchestration directed by Christopher Hogwood is available (Opus Arte, 2010). However this recording is sung in German, and thus does not provide the combination of Mozart's orchestration and Gay's text that Eliot is likely to have heard.

<sup>26</sup> *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Haight, p. 7 (Book 1, Chap. 1); Gillian Beer, 'The Mill on the Floss: "more instruments playing together"', in *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*, ed. by Penny Gay, Judith Johnston, and Catherine Waters (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), pp. 78–90 (p. 80).

<sup>27</sup> Handel, 'Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!' from *Acis and Galatea*, Grace Davidson (soprano), The Sixteen, dir. by Harry Christophers (Coro, 2019).

if contemporary readers recalled the words that Galatea sings in this aria, these would, as Beer points out, ‘evoke darker and more passionate stories to come’ (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 82):

Hush, ye pretty warbling quire!  
Your thrilling strains  
Awake my pains,  
And kindle fierce desire.<sup>28</sup>

Beer’s observation emphasizes how musical allusions in the novel both serve an immediate expressive function and draw our attention to their deeper structural relevance within the coherent amalgamations of myth, tragedy, and philosophical and scientific thought that are fundamental to the novel’s composition and to the experience of reading it.

Maggie’s first more serious musical seduction comes about by the agency of a tenor. When Philip Wakem inspires in her the desire to escape her narrow life and strict code of self-denial, Maggie describes herself as so greedy for intellectual pleasure that it is best for her to do without it, and without seeing Philip. However, her recourse to a musical metaphor to declare that ‘I never felt that I had enough music — I wanted more instruments playing together — I wanted voices to be fuller and deeper’ undermines its declared intent, and she begs Philip to sing her one last thing before she goes (p. 288 (Book 5, Chap. 3)). What he sings to Maggie, his light tenor sotto voce, is the aria ‘[Love in her eyes sits playing](#)’ in which the shepherd Acis voices his longing for a Galatea who displays all the physical signs of passion herself (‘Love on her lips is straying,|[...] Love on her breast sits panting|And swells with soft desire’).<sup>29</sup> After hearing this song, its extended lilting lines no doubt to be imagined sung plaintively by what is later described as Philip’s ‘pleading tenor’, Maggie is persuaded to go on meeting him in secret to feed her passion for books and conversation (p. 289).

The secular nature of *Acis and Galatea* may have made this work more appropriate to Eliot’s purposes in *The Mill on the Floss*, but her conception of Handel’s music as embodying overwhelming passion — every bit as much as Purcell’s — is not restricted to his secular operatic oeuvre. In fact, a precedent exists for this deployment of Handel in her earlier novella, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’, published in *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857, where her heroine, overcome by jealous desires, throws herself into a keyboard rendition of a chorus from *Messiah*. Eliot may have valorized the power of

<sup>28</sup> John Gay, *Acis and Galatea: An English Pastoral Opera in Three Acts* (London: Watts, 1732), I. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Handel, ‘Love in her eyes sits playing’ from *Acis and Galatea*, Anthony Rolfe Johnson (tenor), English Baroque Soloists, dir. by John Eliot Gardiner (Archiv, 2003); Gay, I. 10.



Handel's choruses over that of his solos but, in this story, their power is not exploited for communal virtue or spiritual redemption but to dramatize the fierce emotions of a heroine about to attempt murder.

As an Italian musician adopted by an aristocratic English couple, Caterina, the heroine of the novella, is forced to play and sing for the entertainment of the rich fiancée of the man who has previously made love to her. She finds an outlet for her jealous fury by playing on the harpsichord:

Handel's 'Messiah' stood open on the desk, at the chorus 'All we like sheep,' and Caterina threw herself at once into the impetuous intricacies of that magnificent fugue. In her happiest moments she could never have played it so well; for now all the passion that made her misery was hurled by a convulsive effort into her music.<sup>30</sup>

This is a scene of fervent private expression at the keyboard which is repeated in *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie creates a 'pregnant passionate language' alone at the piano (p. 352 (Book 6, Chap. 6)). But how might this chorus actually sound played 'impetuously' on the harpsichord? Handel sets the opening words with a springing anacrusis, which could indeed enable Caterina to launch into the piece 'impetuously', and it is possible to imagine the succeeding fugal passages, with their rapid running voice parts, performed at the harpsichord with some savagery. The opening phrase is certainly one that is likely to have lodged in a listener's memory. However, a performance on the harpsichord is something the twenty-first century reader can imagine, rather than remember, whereas Eliot and her readers were likely to have known this chorus well as a keyboard piece.

*Fig. 2* is an extract from the arrangement of this chorus best known at the date when Eliot was writing 'Mr Gilfil'. Leading Handel specialist Donald Burrows has no hesitation in identifying, among the copious number of keyboard reductions of Handel's music in existence, Mazzinghi's arrangement as the one likely to have been in Eliot's mind when composing this scene, though she would have heard and played it on the piano rather than the harpsichord.<sup>31</sup> Her story is set in 1788, and the harpsichord

<sup>30</sup> 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 73–187 (p. 154 (Chap. 13)).

<sup>31</sup> Part of the research for this article was presented as a paper for a conference in 2009 in celebration of the 350th anniversary of Henry Purcell's birth (in 1658/59) and the 250th anniversary of Handel's death (in 1759), which the Open University hosted together with the School of Advanced Studies in London and in association with the Purcell and Handel societies. I am indebted to my colleague Professor Donald Burrows and to other musicologists, including the Purcell scholar Bryan White, for insights gleaned during conversations at this conference and beyond. The thumbnail image accompanying this article in the Table of Contents shows the keyboard of a piano that belonged to George Eliot. The photograph is reproduced by kind permission of the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry.



CHORUS - All we like Sheep 35

Allegro  
Moderato

Messiah N<sup>o</sup> 3. VOLT

Fig. 2: G. F. Handel, Pianoforte arrangement of 'All we like sheep' from *Messiah*, by Joseph Mazzinghi, 1802. Professor Donald Burrows.

thus fulfils a historical and nostalgic function, but there is some slippage between the terms harpsichord and piano in the text, and we can reasonably assume that, in 1859 and 1860, the more expressive piano sounded in the imagination of the writer and her readers. This is useful to bear in mind, given that for some current readers, contrapuntal music on the harpsichord might seem a surprising choice for music expressive of passionate emotion and suggest a greater degree of irony than probably intended in the writing.

Eliot's use of the musical terminology associated with music of Handel's time is interesting here too. 'All we like sheep' is fugal in texture rather than a fully worked-out fugue in the formal sense. In using the

term ‘that magnificent fugue’ somewhat loosely from a musician’s point of view, Eliot may also have had some of the wider linguistic connotations of ‘fugue’ in mind. The term suggests a flight for Caterina from feelings too painful to confront, as well as prefiguring her actual flight, slightly later in the story. In subsequent nineteenth-century psychology, ‘fugue’ came to be a term employed to describe aberrant mental states — in which subjects suffering intolerable emotional distress perform acts that are out of character.<sup>32</sup> Here, as the polyphonic textures of the chorus form channels for her heroine’s emotional tumult, ‘fugue’ is certainly allied by Eliot with an intense degree of mental disturbance. She offers the ‘massive chords’ and labyrinthine texture of Handel’s music as a non-verbal equivalent of Caterina’s seething emotions. (In this respect, ‘fugue’ also operates as a musical analogue to the Gothic intricacies of Cheverel Manor, where the story is set.)

Historically, oratorio became popular as a genre for performance during Lent, when fully staged opera was not allowed. Musically at least, oratorio could satisfy the same audience’s need for drama, albeit on themes drawn from the Bible. In this novella, Handel’s oratorio might also be said to have been enlisted to the service of ‘opera’. In their dramatic intensity Caterina’s musical performances punctuate the text in a manner that might remind readers of the way in which arias punctuate operatic recitative. Together with the dramatic nature of the story’s plot — Caterina’s destructive passion, her ‘fierce palpitations of triumph and hatred’, her pursuit of her faithless lover Anthony, dagger in hand — this lends the story ‘operatic’ qualities which have been commented upon both favourably and critically in assessments of Eliot’s developments in realist fiction: Jennifer Gribble regrets Eliot’s ‘operatic’ evasion of real gender issues, while Gillian Beer celebrates the affective power of Eliot’s recruitment of the operatic genre.<sup>33</sup>

In Eliot’s novella, Caterina determines upon murder, but finds the perfidious Anthony already lying dead, appropriately of a diseased heart. She flees and is later recovered and awakened to true love by the restorative power of music. As the vibrations from a note sounded on the harpsichord revive her from a perilous passivity, the allusion to Handel’s chorus has apparently come to have a specific thematic relevance, suggesting that Caterina is a lost sheep in need of redemption (by Gilfil as priest indeed) after the earlier operatic ‘madness of her jealousy’, ‘ungovernable

<sup>32</sup> For discussion of this association with fugue, see Weliver, *Woman Musicians*, pp. 137–39.

<sup>33</sup> Gribble writes that ‘no rehabilitation of “the melodramatic imagination” can disguise the fact that what is going on here is not the release of extreme and repressed feeling but the confirmation of cultural stereotypes associated with Italian opera and European revolutionary ardour’. See ‘Editorial Introduction’, in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Jennifer Gribble (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. ix–xxxvi (p. xxvi); Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 206.

impulses', and 'scorching passion' (p. 144 (Chap. 11)). So there is an echo of the morally improving Handel here perhaps: both Caterina and her musical talent are ultimately reclaimed, and indeed domesticated, by the story's realist plot. After her marriage to Gilfil, Caterina sings for a neighbour in return for inspection of the dairy and cheese room of 'the neatest house [...] in all Shepperton' (p. 85 (Chap. 1)). But musical and poetic memory work together to bypass the linear logic of plot: the reverberations of tragic opera linger on. Caterina also twice sings 'Che farò', the aria sung by Orpheus to lament the loss of Eurydice in the opera by Gluck, another eighteenth-century composer.<sup>34</sup> On both occasions this aria signals moments of unbearable loss — the original loss of the object of love and a second recognition of loss on a return from the Underworld (in Caterina's case an underworld of despair and mental disintegration). When Caterina dies the passionate discontent and tragic loss voiced by Handel's music and Gluck's aria are ultimately what most haunt the story's readers. This, at least, is the dominant effect of the way Eliot uses allusions to these works, although the vigour of Handel's polyphony and the major key of Gluck's aria might be said to make both pieces sufficiently ambiguous in their effects to help forestall unequivocal readings, as is only appropriate for the cohabitation of grand tragedy and realism in Eliot's text.

Eliot and contemporaries such as Sara Hennell may readily have described Handel's voices as 'moralizing', but her fiction is evidence that her responses to his music were never neatly assimilated to moral agenda. Its role in the portrayal of her two most passionate heroines is testimony to the depth and range of significance that Eliot heard in 'the great Handel chorus'. Thus we can read Handel inflected via Gluck in 'Mr Gilfil' and, in *The Mill on the Floss*, via the 'wild passion and fancy' of Purcell's music.

### Purcell in *The Mill on the Floss*

In the musically charged sixth book of *The Mill on the Floss*, music becomes the vehicle through which the conflicting passions of its characters are expressed and amplified. Readers are explicitly encouraged to recognize this when told that Philip uses musical performance as 'an indirect expression to Maggie of what he could not prevail on himself to say to her directly' (p. 366 (Book 6, Chap. 7)). When Maggie is seduced by the resonant bass voice of her cousin's fiancé Stephen Guest, the beguiling influence of *Acis and Galatea* is supplanted by Purcell's music, which she has been hearing Stephen perform (p. 338 (Book 6, Chap. 3)). Musically, this is an entirely

<sup>34</sup> Christoph Willibald Gluck, 'Che farò senza Euridice?' from *Orfeo*, Anne Sofie von Otter (mezzo-soprano), The English Concert, dir. by Trevor Pinnock (Classic Anthems, 1997). Eliot saw Gluck's *Orfeo* in Berlin in 1855.

appropriate pairing as Handel's setting of Gay was probably influenced by Purcell, as Eliot's ears may have told her.<sup>35</sup>

Eliot jokes that Maggie, walking about her room in a state of 'strong excitement', has been captivated by music sung in a 'provincial, amateur fashion' that 'could have had no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady' (p. 337). Her commitment to a tragedy of everyday life in this novel entails placing her heroine both at odds with, and vulnerable to, the limitations of her time and place. This does not detract from the intensity of Maggie's involuntary response to music (and Eliot's satire is, of course, most aimed at the pretensions of the 'well-educated young lady' of the present — thirty years or so later than the novel's setting). 'Purcell's music, with its wild passion and fancy', transports Maggie to a 'brighter aërial world', a world of 'love and beauty and delight' (p. 338). She has been hearing this 'fine music sung by a fine bass voice', its power amplified by the way in which the singer's gaze seems to have 'caught the vibratory influence of the voice' (pp. 337–38). A little later Purcell features again, and this time Eliot specifies that it is the music for *The Tempest* that is performed.

In 1862 Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell requesting the loan of her copy of the music for the Dryden–Davenant adaptation of *The Tempest* to try out with other amateur musicians before buying the score.<sup>36</sup> Familiar to Eliot since her early days in Coventry, this was the most popular work of Purcell's during the nineteenth century and thus well known to much of her readership. Most of this music has subsequently been reattributed to Purcell's pupil John Weldon.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding this, the work plays a significant part in Purcell's reception history until the late twentieth century ('Purcell' is still the search term under which the music can be found in the Naxos music library).

In the intensively musicalized world of Eliot's novel, allusions to the music for *The Tempest* serve to express the competing desires that consume the principal characters and to suggest an operatic dramatization of the contests between them.<sup>38</sup> While Lucy and Philip are occupied in singing from this music, Stephen takes the opportunity tenderly to place a footstool for Maggie. Recognizing the force of attraction between the two at this point, Philip plays the accompaniment ever more falsely as Stephen

<sup>35</sup> This was commented on during the nineteenth century. See E. D. Rendall, 'The Influence of Henry Purcell on Handel, Traced in "Acis and Galatea"', in *Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular*, May 1895, pp. 293–96 (p. 296).

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, [8 February 1862], in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, iv, 12; ix: 1871–1881 (1978), p. 348, n. 12:16.

<sup>37</sup> By the musicologist Margaret Laurie. See her article, 'Did Purcell Set *The Tempest*?', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 90 (1963–64), 43–57.

<sup>38</sup> Eliot's expressive use of musical allusion is discussed more fully in my chapter on the novel in *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, pp. 102–29.

adds the force of his rich bass ‘pouring in again’ to the music (pp. 367–68 (Book 6, Chap. 7)).

Eliot does not specify which numbers from *The Tempest* are sung. Any suggestions have to remain speculative, although many of her readers were likely to have known the music well enough to supply their own imagined soundtrack. (Here I perhaps should clarify that, in offering musical examples, I am not suggesting that we should read the novel with the music playing, but rather that we benefit from having this kind of music among the experiences that form a context for our reading.) While the general allusion to the *Tempest* music is sufficient to conjure a musicalized atmosphere for those who know this music, some specific, if hypothetical, suggestions might be of value to current readers of Eliot. Perhaps, then, when Maggie is first possessed by the memory of Stephen singing Purcell, Eliot imagined him performing ‘*Arise, ye subterranean winds*’, an aria from the settings for *The Tempest* that provides ample scope for displaying the power and resonance of a ‘fine bass voice’.<sup>39</sup> Eliot’s novel might well have prompted her readers’ memories of this piece.

In Maggie, Purcell’s music, as sung by Stephen, reverberates to devastating effect, transforming her into a helplessly resonating musical instrument (p. 338 (Book 6, Chap. 3)). The fact that Eliot leaves the precise pieces performed unspecified allows readers to supply any or several examples on the basis of their own musical memories — or to imagine a more ideal unheard Music, as is often the aim and effect of a lack of specificity in musical allusion in post-Romantic literature. (In this way, Eliot manages to suggest a music that is simultaneously erotic, communicative, and ineffable.)

‘*Arise ye subterranean winds*’ was a popular bass solo and there are numerous further arias with which readers might also have imagined Stephen singing, including Neptune’s ‘*See, see, the heavens smile*’. With Lucy he could have sung the pair of recitatives and arias, ‘*Aeolus, you must appear*’ and ‘*Your awful voice I hear*’, or even the final and enchanting ‘*No stars again shall hurt you*’, which starts as a duet for Neptune and Amphitrite, with two middle voices joining later, whose parts in the chorus could be covered by the piano accompaniment. The most likely candidate for the scene where Stephen rejoins Lucy in the singing, after his brief but significant act of placing Maggie’s footstool, is a recitative and aria, ‘*Great Neptune!*’, which begins with a brief solo for the soprano Amphitrite (i.e. Lucy, with Philip bungling the piano); Neptune then takes over — at which point, Stephen’s voice comes ‘pouring in again’ with musically gorgeous lines of extravagant devotion — ‘*My dear, my Amphitrite|All I wish is*

<sup>39</sup> Henry Purcell/John Weldon, ‘*Arise, ye subterranean winds*’ from *The Tempest*, David Thomas (bass), Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra, dir. by John Eliot Gardiner (Erato, 1990); *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Haight, pp. 337–38 (Book 6, Chap. 3).



to delight thee' — from a Neptune who undertakes to calm the winds in her honour.<sup>40</sup> This is definitely music that comes from a 'brighter aërial world', promising Maggie realms of 'love and beauty and delight' (p. 338). Regardless of the specific arias that readers are most likely to have associated with these passages in Eliot's novel, the *Tempest* music provides arousing and seductive settings of persistently beguiling texts: 'Kind fortune smiles'; 'In this now happy isle|Are all your sorrows past'; 'No stars again shall hurt you from above|But all your days shall pass in peace and love.' It is not hard to imagine that, for Maggie, who has recently come from the 'jarring sounds' of the schoolroom where she earns a living, these words and music would have had the effect Eliot describes, 'rousing and exalting her imagination' (p. 338).

In *The Mill on the Floss* the influence of Purcell's, as previously of Handel's, music is to undermine Maggie's remembered sense of duty to past ties. With this music of Purcell 'vibrating in her still', she becomes the physical embodiment of a different, more atavistic form of memory, the inherited musical response of prehuman ancestors for whom, as Darwin rather gleefully concluded in *The Descent of Man*, music must have evolved primarily as an agent of sexual attraction.<sup>41</sup> It is an influence that, in its physical (acoustical) and physiological dimensions, complicates the view of music as a civilizing language of emotion which was promoted by Herbert Spencer and others.<sup>42</sup>

Eliot's depiction of Maggie's passionate response to Purcell's music reinforces the complex tensions between moral responsibility and biological determinism that underpin Eliot's updating of ancient tragedy in the light of modern science. In *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot's allusions to music form part of her reaction to Spencer's theories of 'The Laws of Attraction', which form one of the chapter titles in her novel. In her portrayals of musical response the new language of determinist science meets the old languages of poetry and myth, intensifying the impossible conflict of fate and volition at the root of tragedy, the clash of irreconcilable claims that Eliot herself had foregrounded in her 1856 *Leader* essay on Sophocles' *Antigone*.<sup>43</sup>

1859, the year in which Eliot was at work on this novel, of course saw the first publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and already Eliot was making the new language of evolutionary biology old — using it to deepen

<sup>40</sup> Purcell/Weldon, 'Great Neptune!' from *The Tempest*, Jennifer Smith (soprano), Stephen Varcoe (baritone), Monteverdi Orchestra and Choir, dir. by John Eliot Gardiner.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1871), II, 337.

<sup>42</sup> For more extensive discussion of music and contemporary scientific theory in relation to *The Mill on the Floss*, see my chapter on the novel in *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, pp. 102–29.

<sup>43</sup> George Eliot, 'The *Antigone* and its Moral', *Leader*, 29 March 1856, p. 306.



age-old tragic themes and staking a claim for the realist novel, the newly dominant narrative form, as a powerful vehicle for ancient cultural forms as much as for engagement with the empirical and progressive ideologies with which its development was so closely bound up. Later, in *Daniel Deronda*, she would follow a similar pattern to create a metaphor of invisible inheritance. Music provides Daniel with an emblem for the incarnation of racial heritage. In an image which unites concepts of spontaneous inspiration with biological inheritance, suggesting both the harp of David and the Coleridgean aeolian lyre, Daniel reflects that a people's innate 'ancestral life' 'would lie within them' even if unrecognized:

And the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music. (pp. 697–98 (Chap. 63))

Here, Eliot has, surely, updated an allusion to Shakespeare's *Richard II*, where a viol or harp 'unstrung' or a 'cunning instrument' shut away or unfamiliar to the touch are all listed to figure a lost capacity for utterance.<sup>44</sup> Such connections lend the novel-genre authority and show how comprehensively all Eliot's interests, including music, are enmeshed with her literary and cultural concerns; they exemplify how allusions to music contribute to the intricate structures of her work and to how we read these.

Eliot's allusions to Handel and Purcell are part of her dramatization of a conflict of irreconcilable desires in *The Mill on the Floss* in which her heroine's passionate intellect is embodied in her desire for 'more instruments sounding together' (p. 288 (Book 5, Chap. 3)). Handel and Purcell are the composers that most speak to this impassioned longing.<sup>45</sup>

Exploring the use Eliot made of the music of previous centuries can help us to register the routinely overlooked extent to which musical allusions are integral to the intertextual forces at work in the composition of literary works and their evolving reception. Our own reading of Eliot's allusions to music are coloured in turn by a wealth of reading and listening experiences even as we attempt to gain a historicized sense of the sound world of Eliot's novels. Both these things matter. We need to imagine a soundscape that is radically different from our own, and we can benefit from acknowledging how these musical allusions impact our reading

<sup>44</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1. 3. 161–65. I have not seen this source identified elsewhere.

<sup>45</sup> In contrast, for example, to Haydn's *Creation*, dismissed by Philip as 'sugared complacency and flattering make-believe', which supplies the soundscape for Lucy and Stephen's 'Duet in Paradise' (p. 323 (Book 6, Chap. 1)).

experiences now as well as upon our historical understanding.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, the very attempt to find a bridge between listening experiences now and then can enhance our sensitivity to both gaps and connections between us and Victorian listeners, bringing greater understanding both of how the sound worlds of fiction mattered then and of the soundscapes within which we read today.

For of course, no matter how historically ‘authentic’ a musical performance we hear, we cannot erase the difference in our musical sensibilities from those of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, although we cannot listen with nineteenth-century ears, hearing the music referred to by Eliot makes a difference. Notwithstanding our easier access to this music via recordings and the expanded repertoire now available, many readers today are no longer as familiar with the historical repertoire discussed in this article as Eliot’s Victorian readers would generally have been; listening to it can bring new insights. One listener, a senior scholar of Eliot, remarked that imagining Stephen Guest as someone who could achieve even an amateur performance of Neptune’s arias significantly changed her view of his character. Clearly, imagining his impact on Maggie Tulliver, deprived of both metaphorical and actual music, is much enhanced if readers can ‘hear’ the music he sings, so that it haunts our memories alongside our reading and recollection of the novel (p. 338 (Book 6, Chap. 3)).

The impacts of music on the experience of reading, and on how we remember that experience, are among the many relationships between reading and listening that invite wider discussion. In *The Mill on the Floss*, accounts of musical response convey a claim for the novel’s affective power; the somatic responses impelled by music — Maggie as a vibrating musical instrument — are recruited to emphasize the emotional and physical responses that can also be inspired by prose. Reflecting on how allusions to music impact on the listener seems a particularly apt and effective way to register the somatic responses that are also involved in reading. Further, remembered or ideal music that forms a synchronous, if imagined, accompaniment to reading might entrain readers in a less direct fashion than the effects of rhythm and repetition in poetry, but can nevertheless be recognized as helping to create a form of imagined reading community, as do the ways in which music can shape our retrospective memories of reading.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> The musicologist Michael Klein advocates this combination of rigorous historicization with acknowledgement of how music and literature help form subjectivities now. See Michael L. Klein, ‘Origins and Destinations: A Future for Literature and Music’, in the forthcoming *Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Music*, ed. by da Sousa Correa.

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Dames discusses music and remembered reading to support his view that Eliot uses Wagnerian techniques to direct readers of *Daniel Deronda* (p. 139). I would add that integrated and ‘motivic’ employment of musical allusion is a feature of Eliot’s writing from her earliest fiction and her valorization of music as a

Eliot's closely integrated use of musical allusion within the structures of her work and her engagement with the physicality of musical experience impact both on the intensity of our experience of reading and on how we remember that experience, retrospectively concentrating extended sequences of narrative and the duration of reading. The lingering influence of the music of Handel and Purcell on our memories of reading *The Mill on the Floss* may determine that the novel is not only recalled in the echo of its musical moments, but is registered in memory as a coherent and potentially musicalized whole: a 'mighty structure of tones' through which the literature and music of the past inhabit our present.

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metaphor for writing, the emotions, and morality is a feature of her early criticism and correspondence, laying the ground for her enthusiastic reception of Wagner's views on organic unity in drama, as arising from character development and his evolving use of musical motive. See George Eliot, 'Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar', in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. by Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge, 1963), pp. 96–122 (pp. 101–04) (first publ. in *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1855, pp. 48–62). The same principles were to be fundamental to her own work, including in relation to the music of a wide range of composers. For further discussion of Eliot's responses to Wagner, see my *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture*, pp. 11–12, 44–57, 131–34. Eliot's defence of Caterina Sarti's characterization to her publisher John Blackwood stresses these same criteria of plot arising out of the 'psychological conception of the dramatis personae' as justifying her heroine's more extreme (or what might be termed 'operatic') actions (letter to John Blackwood, 18 February 1857, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, II, 299).